# Theology  

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## A Christian Perspective on Corruption

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Corruption is widely practiced in Cambodia. Even some highly respected professionals, such as schoolteachers, medical doctors, and lawyers, are infected by this disease. Corruption has become so common that even Christians-nationals and expatriates alike-often find themselves unconsciously involved in it (let alone a few "believers" who actively practice corruption as part of their strategy to expand the "Kingdom of God").

Since God has called us to live in this society, we should reflect on this problem from his perspective, rather than ignore or overlook it.

## The Universality of Corruption

Corruption is a universal social phenomenon with which every society has struggled throughout human history. Each culture has its own definition for corruption, but all consider it to be immoral.

Some define corruption as using a public position for personal benefit. For others it is a means to divert someone from his duty. The former focuses on the action of taking bribes; the latter on offering them. But both actions are fraudulent.

The problem of corruption dates back to the beginning of recorded human history. In the Old Testament, when Samuel spoke to the Israelites after having chosen a king for them, he asked, "From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes?" Samuel's question shows that the practice was already known in ancient Israel. Later, when King Jehoshaphat appointed judges for the people of Judah, he urged them to "Judge carefully, for with Yahweh our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery."

Throughout history, corruption has begun with electoral and political delinquency. Candidates purchase votes with money. Civil servants pay bribes to access higher positions that entitle them to more money and honor. The practice was well known in ancient Roman society. The Romans enacted laws to punish or banish people practicing corruption. In ancient Greece, corruption was often related to judicial affairs. One paid jurists to hand down verdicts that flew in the face of evidence, or paid public officials for improper favors.

Many countries nowadays have laws against fraud in elections, or in political, administrative, and judicial affairs. In modern society, corrupt practices may also take place within the economic system, such as financial manipulation or business corruption. Economic corruption is sometimes practiced at the international level. Business people pay bribes to obtain contracts or markets so that they can make larger profits. They sometimes increase their profits by using inferior materials and cheating on the quality of work provided.

Some governments often fight corruption because it deprives them of finances. Others oppose it because corruption leads to inefficiency (a citizen's needs are met only if he pays for the official's attention).

Corporations fight corruption because it reduces profits. The legal profession opposes bribery because it violates the principle of free and equal justice for all, not just those who can pay for it.

[^0]Institutions such as Christian churches perceive corruption as an ethical problem. They therefore denounce this practice, as they do other forms of $\sin$.

## Riches, Poverty and Corruption

In many societies, corruption is practiced at all levels, from simple day-to-day transactions to high-level state decisions. In such societies, the triad of "riches, poverty, and corruption" are so intertwined that we cannot approach these phenomena separately. Corruption becomes so deeply engrained that it comprises part of "the system"the way things get done. Parents bribe schoolteachers to give their children good grades, or allow them to graduate. Medical care is accessible only to those who can bribe the practitioner. Officials issue licenses and other approvals if the applicant pays them under the counter, etc.

The first victims in such a society are the poor. Lack of finances denies them access to education or medical care. Those who rule over them often oppress them. National riches are misappropriatedsquandered by those in authority. The powerless poor, with no access to "the system," end up exploited, treated unfairly, and abused. Corrupt practices are not punished. Honesty appears to be unrewarded. People begin to perceive all riches and wealth negatively as dishonest gain. This state of affairs contradicts God's intention.

In the Old Testament, especially during the patriarchal period, wealth was often perceived as a sign of God's favor and blessing. "Riches are initially success guaranteed by God to those who observe the laws of the covenant. ${ }^{3}$ 3 This positive view of riches is also a concept in Wisdom tradition. For instance, Job received a double reward after proving himself righteous and faithful before God. ${ }^{4}$ By contrast,
${ }^{3}$ Conrad Boerma, The Rich, the Poor and the Bible (Philadelphia:
Westminster, 1980) 11.
${ }^{4}$ Job 42:10.
some Old Testament passages state that poverty may result either from God's punishment for violating the Law ${ }^{5}$ or from laziness. ${ }^{6}$

But in a corrupt society, these concepts of riches and poverty are inverted. The rich are in fact often those who transgress the laws of God and society, while the poor suffer as victims of the selfishness and covetousness of others. This reversed situation was already known in later Old Testament history, when God condemned the rich and declared himself the defender of the poor and oppressed.?

## Corruption in Cambodian Society

In Cambodia, corruption is not a new problem. It is part of traditional political mentality. Each "key position" is a "benefit" that one must purchase by money or gift.

We must, however, make distinction between "corruption in high levels" and "small day-to-day corruption." The first is practiced by those who unscrupulously squander national resources. They neither worry about national interest nor concern themselves with the wellbeing of the poor. This kind of corruption needs to be condemned energetically, not only by individuals, but also by moral forces such as Christian churches.

The second category of corruption concerns ordinary day-today transactions in society-e.g., paying an official to obtain papers, or a policeman an imaginary "toll" in order to continue traveling. Fulltime employment should enable someone to feed his family. At the present, in order to live honorably, an average family in Phnom Penh needs a monthly income of US $\$ 200$. But a schoolteacher, policeman, or soldier earns less than US \$50 per month. How can they increase their income and provide honestly for their families? From a Christian moral perspective, I think it is hard to condemn someone involved in corruption in order to feed his family, without trying to find means of helping him meet his daily needs.

[^1]Another act of giving is worth mentioning here that in itself is not fraud, but when misused could easily become so. In traditional societies, especially in Asia, a "gratuity" becomes part of interpersonal relations between those who occupy a position of authority and those who do not. In Cambodian society, one never goes to see another person for a favor with empty hands. The "gift" is part of elementary courtesy. However, one must make the distinction between a "gift" to influence the decision and a "gift" as an act of gratitude. The gap between these two is so narrow and slippery that we must rely on much wisdom when we find ourselves in such a situation.

For instance, all of us are aware that local authorities often require Christians to pay $\$ 500$ for permission to open a church or a Christian ministry. I think paying $\$ 500$ to a village chief for his personal gain in order to obtain authorization for evangelism, church planting, or other holistic ministry, is reprehensible. But if the law requires you pay this amount into local administrative coffers, this entails no corruption. After you get the license, you are free to offer a gift to the village chief as recognition for the service he has provided, and I think this is culturally acceptable.

We must keep in mind that corruption takes place when a gift influences the decision of its recipient.

## The Christian Attitude and Biblical Teaching toward Corruption

In Christian Social Ethics, Exerting Christian Influence, ${ }^{8}$ Rasmussen describes two categories of reaction vis-à-vis the problem of corruption.

1. Righteous indignation: Those who react this way consider themselves blameless. They separate society in two exclusive classes: the bad and the good, but forget that all human hearts contain a mixture of both.
${ }^{8}$ Albert Terrill Rasmussen, Christian Social Ethics, Exerting Christian Influence (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1956).
2. Cynical Complacency: Those who react this way oppose the above moralist attitude, and excuse corruption as simply a part of human nature. They regard corruption as a reality of life, and therefore adopt an attitude of complacency. They hold this cynical and conformist attitude, and tend to compare corruption in their society to the worst ones.

I believe that as Christians we should react to this problem with humble recognition of our own involvement, rather than considering ourselves innocent and only blaming others. Instead of either condemning or ignoring the problem, Christians should actively critique the morality of the society we belong to, while simultaneously sharing responsibility and guilt.

Scripture clearly states God's view of corruption:
"Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous." ${ }^{\text {" }}$

Israel's prophets urged justice for all of God's people. They considered corruption as an offense against the justice of God, and announced that such practices would incur punishment from God. They condemned these evil practices, and called for repentance. Amos said:

You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain.
Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins.
You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.
Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil.
Seek good, not evil, that you may live.
${ }^{9}$ Deut 16:19; Ex 23:8.

Then Yahweh God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is.
Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.
Perhaps Yahweh God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. ${ }^{10}$

## Conclusion

When living in a society where corruption has engrained itself in the culture, the Christian should not only condemn the practice, but also individually reflect God's holiness through his or her honest lifestyle. There is often a significant price to pay to be honest.

We must also highlight the value of work as the only valid means to gain income, and as one of the best remedies against corruption and poverty.

Corruption is more than a personal moral issue; it is a national ill that cries out to be cured. As Christians we long for a society free from corruption. Churches are often shy in denouncing this evil, even as it continues to spread, fattening the wealthy and emaciating the poor. Although a minority in this country, we should act as parapets against corruption in society, taking stands clearly. We must, on the one hand, unite to fight all forms of corruption, and on the other, struggle proactively against corruption through our holistic ministries. Throughout history, the church of Christ has always cared for the poor and needy. The church of Cambodia is not exempt from this calling. Our church is growing, and it is now time for us to aspire to maturity. Instead of "delegating" NGO's to fulfill our duties towards to poor, the Cambodian church must become more responsible. Proclamation of the gospel and the concern for the needy must go together.












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    ${ }^{2} 2$ Chron 19:7.

[^1]:    ${ }^{5}$ Lev 26:14-26; Deut 15:24.
    ${ }^{6}$ Prov 6:6-11.
    ${ }^{7} E x 22: 21-27 ; 23: 6-7$.

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